

World

NICARAGUA

"The Revolution Is Not Finished"*In the countryside, a presidential road show and a rare chat*

The road from Managua to the town of Tierra Azul has been an occasional target for antigovernment rebels. So when President Daniel Ortega Saavedra recently made the two-hour trip, he took along plenty of security. A fleet of more than a dozen sturdy vans accompanied the President's off-white Toyota, while an armed, Soviet-made helicopter provided surveillance from the air. When Ortega, 40, reached his destination, a makeshift plaza, he quickly took a seat behind a long table. "Face the People," a folksy forum that brings ordinary Nicaraguans into contact with officials of the Marxist-oriented Sandinista government, was under way.

For more than two hours Ortega faced questions from campesinos who had gathered for the occasion. Would the President find more land for peasants? (Yes. That very afternoon he would award 375 families some 6,000 acres of land.) Would he help arm the townspeople against the U.S.-sponsored *contra* rebels? (No. Nicaragua, he said, has no spare firearms.) Ortega rarely missed an opportunity to promote the goals and concerns of the Sandinista regime. "The revolution is not yet finished," he declared.

Later, as the youthful President headed back toward Managua, he stopped at a roadside restaurant, where he stripped down to a black T shirt and ate a lunch of rice, tortillas, chicken, steak and beer. Afterward he climbed behind the wheel of his Toyota, with a radiotelephone next to the gearshift and a rifle under the seat, and settled in for the drive back to the capital city. For the next 90 minutes, Ortega, occasionally taking his hands from the wheel to make a point, gave an unusually informal interview to TIME.

While he talked and laughed comfortably, Ortega found no humor in what he described as the "greater pressures" now being exerted on Nicaragua by the Reagan Administration: "I think that the U.S. is attempting to create conditions for a major offensive on a military order," he said. "You can feel it in the air." Ortega's warnings of a pending Yanqui invasion are not new. Nicaraguan leaders usually interpret any major *contra* move as a prelude to U.S. intervention. But the message from Washington has grown more menacing in recent weeks, and while some political analysts view the attacks as the opening moves of the Reagan Administration's annual bid to Congress for increased *contra* funding, Ortega claimed to hear the sounds of war. U.S. officials, he

said, "are trying to create conditions like those they created to invade Grenada."

Indeed, only hours before, President Reagan had denounced the Sandinista regime in his weekly Saturday radio address. Nicaragua, he said, was "a nation condemned to unrelenting cruelty by a clique of very cruel men, by a dictator in designer glasses." * Reagan charged that "some 3,000 Cuban military personnel now lead and advise the Nicaraguan forces," a number that is confirmed by U.S. intelligence reports. Sandinista officials claim that Nicaragua has only 800



Ortega listens to the problems of a woman in the town of Tierra Azul

noncombatant Cuban advisers. Reagan also repeated earlier Administration allegations that the Sandinistas had armed the M-19 guerrillas who stormed Bogotá's Palace of Justice last month. Both Colombia's Foreign Minister and Sandinista leaders denied the charge. U.S. intelli-

*The reference was to six pairs of \$300 eyeglasses that Ortega purchased during a visit to New York City for the 40th anniversary of the United Nations in October.



Emphasizing a point on the road to Managua
Headaches at home, threats from abroad.

gence officials, however, contended last week that guns retrieved from the palace bore serial numbers that identified them as part of a shipment that moved from North Viet Nam via Cuba to Nicaragua and on to Colombia.

The war of words between Washington and Managua has heated up since Dec. 2, when *contras* downed a Soviet-built Sandinista Mi-8 helicopter with a Soviet-made SA-7 surface-to-air missile. The U.S. charged that the chopper was piloted by a Cuban, and that the co-pilot was also a Cuban. It was the first time the *contras* had used such rockets in battle. Declared Secretary of State George Shultz: "Fine, I'm all for it. I hope they get more of these weapons." The incident marked a turning point of sorts for the Sandinistas. "Now that [SA-7s] are introduced, the war has a new character," warned Ortega. Never before, he insisted, have Latin American guerrilla forces used such advanced weaponry. "When Shultz says it is right that the irregulars use these rockets, then that is giving the go-ahead to the use of rockets to any irregular force in any part of the world."

Ortega's domestic headaches are of the migraine sort. They range from scarcities of food, high prices and low wages to housing shortages, lagging production and a severe trade imbalance. Even so, Ortega seemed relatively untroubled by the widespread economic hardship. "More than the material well-being the revolution could have brought or can offer is the moral satisfaction of the people," he said. "They feel they can talk, participate, make demands, organize."

Of graver concern, he insisted, was the U.S. challenge. "There is only one pressure," he said. "That is the military, political and economic pressure of the United States." The Nicaraguan people, he added, "see the U.S.-sponsored counterrevolution destroy the schools, health centers, cooperatives. This causes people to commit themselves more readily to the patriotic military service." The "so-called Third World countries," he continued, must also worry. "If the U.S. invades Nicaragua," he said, "then this endangers the security of all developing countries."

For all his anti-U.S. talk, though, Ortega admitted that the bonds between the two countries run deep. "We are not trying to eradicate the North American social and cultural influence," he said. "We would like to have relations with the U.S. as good as those we hold with the Soviet Union." As he drove into Managua, Ortega grew reflective. "We need peace," he said. "The future of the children is not the best here in Nicaragua." —By Jill Smolowe.

Reported by Laura López, with Ortega